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THE U.S. DECISION IN 1961 TO  
INCREASE ASSISTANCE TO SOUTH VIETNAM

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NOTE

This D is one of a series of case studies which were prepared for a comparative analysis of past failures of deterrence and U.S. efforts to deal with them. Each historical case study was guided by a standardized list of general questions (reproduced in D-17481-PR) that reflect the research objectives of the overall comparative study. These questions have been adapted to the special nature of each case.

The case studies in this series are working drafts subject to revision. They are based largely on available secondary analyses, although some primary sources have also been utilized. As explained in D-17481-PR and illustrated in D-17482-PR, the historical case studies provide building blocks for the comparative analysis. An iterative research strategy is being followed which permits interaction between individual case studies and the comparative analysis. We hope this strategy will lead to a progressive clarification of the research questions, hypotheses, and data requirements for the overall study. The case studies issued in this and other D's are preliminary analyses that have not yet been revised on the basis of the experience gained during the course of the project.

The complete series of D's being issued at this time is as follows:

D-17481-PR, "Research Outline and Methodology for Study of Deterrence," by A. L. George.

D-17482-PR, "Failures of Deterrence: A Comparative Analysis," by A. L. George.



- D-17483-PR, "Korea and the Failure of Deterrence,"  
by Jane Howland.
- D-17484-PR, "The Second Failure of Deterrence in Korea:  
The Chinese Communist Intervention,"  
by Jane Howland.
- D-17485-PR, "The U.S. Decision Not to Intervene in  
Indochina in 1954," by Jane Howland.
- D-17486-PR, "The Quemoy Crisis of 1958," by Jane  
Howland.
- D-17487-PR, "The U.S. Decision in 1961 to Increase  
Assistance to South Vietnam," by Jane  
Howland.
- D-17488-PR, "The Three Berlin Crises," by Jane  
Howland (to be issued shortly).

Earlier publications stemming from this project, which focus on some of the problems of using force as an instrument of policy after deterrence has failed, include the following:

- RM-4844-PR, Some Thoughts on Graduated Escalation,  
by A. L. George, December 1965.
- D-15878-PR, "Notes on the Coercive Use of Force,"  
by A. L. George, July 1967.
- P-3627, "Presidential Control of Force: The Korean  
War and the Cuban Missile Crisis," by  
A. L. George, July 1967.

Comments are invited.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since 1947 the United States has relied on a policy of containment to prevent Communist expansion. The major thrust of this policy has been to deter opponents from attempts to alter the status quo. When these efforts fail, when deterrence fails, Washington policy-makers must decide how the United States will respond. U.S. response usually entails formulating objectives, examining available alternatives, weighing the possible consequences, and deciding on the (hopefully) optimum course of action. The fact that these failures of deterrence and the U.S. response to them often result in great world crises, even in limited wars, underscores their seriousness and points up the need to study them in greater detail to see why and how they happen and if they can be prevented.

This study focuses on one of these failures in an effort to determine what did happen. I have asked three general questions of the data: 1) Why and how did the United States attempt to deter an opponent from aggressive (overt and covert) moves into an area? 2) What factors persuaded the opponent to risk challenging U.S. deterrence? and 3) What was the American response to this challenge? A detailed examination of these questions may reveal some unexplored, or at least imperfectly understood, areas of decision-making.

It happens that this case study has particular relevance today because it deals with the current U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Nearly everyone agrees, whatever his views on the proper way to conduct the war, that the

present situation is the result of many seemingly small and insignificant decisions, the accumulation of which has produced the presently unmanageable war. This is a description and partial analysis of one of those seemingly "small" decisions.



## II. U.S. ATTEMPTS TO DETER IN SOUTH VIETNAM

Active American intervention in South Vietnam dates from the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Although U.S. officials did not sign the agreements that divided the country into a northern Communist section and a southern pro-Western section, they did sign a separate paper that indicated the United States would support the accords. In fact, the United States did a great deal more than support the agreements, it quite literally supported the government of South Vietnam.

This intervention in Vietnamese affairs sprang from fears of a Communist takeover of Southeast Asia. In the mid-fifties, the threat of an international Communist conspiracy that sought to destroy the Western powers in order to control the world loomed large in the minds of many Americans, inside and outside the government. John Foster Dulles, Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of State, has been excoriated for his leading role in promulgating this version of the devil theory in history. But Dulles is not alone to blame for the deep fears that motivated American intervention in Asian affairs. He represented and gave voice to a large segment of the American population that found the new post-war world confusing and frightening. Simple solutions, such as a Communist conspiracy, seemed to explain world-wide disorder. American policy-makers rarely examined the more complex issues underlying popular unrest. Operating on the premise that the United States must prevent the Communists from further encroachments in Asia (China was "lost" in 1949 to Communism, no more such



failures could be tolerated), Washington leaders quite readily accepted the burden of economic aid and military assistance in South Vietnam.

On the surface it appeared that the aid and assistance were working in the years between 1954 and 1959. (Warner, The Last Confucian, pp. 137-139.) Reports from the field were optimistic and officials took heart in the "miracle" of South Vietnam. The government of Ngo Dinh Diem seemed stable, if somewhat authoritarian; the economy perked along; and the army was well-equipped and well-trained for a conventional Korea-type invasion.

In late 1959 and throughout 1960 this surrealistic picture began to disintegrate. More and more informed people recognized the weakness and unpopularity of Diem's administration. Communists within South Vietnam (some of whom had infiltrated from the north) and some dissident nationalists unhappy with Diem sought to overthrow him through insurgency. Critics of Diem repeatedly warned him that he must clean up the corruption of his government and concentrate on protecting his people from the increasing terrorism or face a revolt. Diem heard the warnings, but chose to attack the critics instead of the problems.

Eisenhower, waiting out his last year of office, apparently saw no handwriting on the wall in South Vietnam. If he did, he did nothing. The situation remained the same, that is, grew worse throughout the Presidential campaign of 1960. It was only after Kennedy assumed office in January 1961 that Washington began to heed the warnings.

Before discussing Kennedy's response to this failure of American efforts, some questions and answers about U.S. deterrence in South Vietnam may be relevant.



First, why did Washington attempt to deter opponents in South Vietnam? Some reasons have already been mentioned. U.S. officials desperately wanted to contain Communism in Southeast Asia. In their view, it was in the national interest to prevent Communist expansion in South Vietnam. The prestige of the United States was at stake because Washington was committed to a "free" Vietnam. The security of the United States was at stake because South Vietnam was the strategic "gateway to Southeast Asia," the area from which Japan had launched its campaign to conquer Burma and Malaya. (Cherne, "Deepening...")

The second question deals with the "how" of deterring Communist aggression. Washington's methods of deterrence were two-pronged. Strategists concentrated on building a standing army that could defeat an invasion from the north. (Stempel, p. 291.) Economists focused on rebuilding the economy of the shattered nation. Policy-makers thought the army would deter overt military aggression and a viable, stable economy would deter covert aggression. They overlooked (or discounted) the threat of insurgency against a politically inept government. Military power and economic vigor are important ingredients in a nation's survival, but if the people's social needs and security requirements are neglected, military and economic strengths are susceptible to insurgency campaigns that exploit the grievances of the people. This is what happened in South Vietnam.

An obvious answer to the third question about deterrence methods -- how effective were the efforts? -- is clear. The methods were disastrously ineffective. They were ineffective primarily because they were based on wrong assumptions.

Washington assumed that the Communists were the opponents and that the threat was military. As a result military organizations played a key role in shaping U.S. policy in Vietnam, and military perceptions dominated the official view. (Warner, Last..., pp. 129-130; Stempel, p. 313.)

Of course U.S. policy-makers knew there was a political problem, but they hoped that military assistance would provide the necessary backbone upon which political strength could be built. Several factors prevented this from happening. The most significant factor was Diem. Recognizing (and capitalizing) on American fears of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, Diem knew he could count on continued U.S. military assistance no matter what kind of a government he ran -- as long as it was pro-American and anti-Communist. He could (and did) easily brush aside occasional U.S. attempts to urge him to introduce reform measures.

By playing on U.S. fears of a possible Communist takeover, Diem placed severe obstacles in the way of the United States achieving any success in South Vietnam. Success would have been quite limited in any event because Diem worried as much about a takeover by the Americans as by the Communists. (Stempel, p. 299.) He consistently wanted more help, but under his direction and control, not Washington's. Clearly, Diem's intransigency was a constraint on U.S. policy-makers.

The only way the United States might have wrung success out of failure would have been to demand that reforms be a condition to further military assistance. Officials in the upper echelons of Washington didn't do this,



apparently because they weren't aware of the urgent need. Even if they had been aware of the urgency there is some doubt that they would have made demands on Diem. They worried that he might refuse to make the reforms; the Communists would surely triumph without U.S. assistance. They also worried that if Diem did accept the ultimatum he wouldn't be able to implement the reforms fast enough; the Communists would take over while the United States waited for the changes to be made. Unquestionably, it was a difficult problem for Washington. Rather than face it, American policy-makers glossed over the difficulties and continued to support Diem.

The problems were heightened by the intelligence gap or, more accurately, the intelligence breakdown. Official reports from Vietnam were unfailingly optimistic. The evidence indicates that the people in the Saigon Embassy really believed that Diem was performing well. There is no question, however, that they knew what kind of news the State Department wanted to hear. Anybody casting doubt on the authenticity of the information out of Vietnam was told that he "wasn't a team player" or that he "didn't have the big picture." (Stempel, p. 129.) In view of the State Department's determination to hear only good and Saigon's determination to see only good, it's hardly surprising that accurate, objective accounts rarely surfaced in official Washington circles -- an unhappy condition that explains in part why U.S. attempts to deter in South Vietnam were ineffective.

Lack of coordination between the various departments handling Vietnam also contributed to American ineffectiveness. (Stempel, p. 317.) Several agencies within the State and

Defense Departments plus the CIA engaged in a kind of limited rivalry for power. Each organization had a vested interest in its own program and each fought for recognition as well as for influence to continue it. Periodically officials made attempts to cut through the morass of confining (and sometimes conflicting) programs. (Stempel, p. 314.) Few attempts went beyond the talking stage; those that did failed to bring order to the confusion.

Because U.S. attempts to deter hostile aggression against the Saigon government seem so patently ineffectual in retrospect, it's pertinent to ask if Washington received any warnings of the possibility of a breakdown in deterrence. There were warnings. Evidence that deterrence wasn't working began to appear in 1959 when guerrilla terrorists launched a campaign to rid the countryside of village leaders who supported the Diem regime. At the same time, the insurgents successfully persuaded vast numbers of peasants to join their cause. Diem was in trouble very quickly and would have been overthrown without American assistance.

Diem had made two major mistakes. First, he had not provided the people with a government they wanted to defend. Most South Vietnamese failed to see any connection between the survival of Diem's government and their welfare. Second, he had not prepared for a war of counterinsurgency. There simply weren't enough civil guards to protect the people from the guerrillas. As a consequence of these mistakes most of the rural areas in South Vietnam were soon controlled by the insurgents.



If these warnings of increasing violence and terrorism weren't enough (many Americans believed the U.S. official who "explained" that the terrorists' activity was a response to the success of Diem's government), there were also political warnings. (Stempel, p. 101.) In March 1960 the National Liberation Front (at the time a coalition of anti-Diem Communists and non-Communists) was established. Here was a clear warning that Diem was not doing his part to help America keep his pro-Western government alive. But Washington did not see the significance of these political attacks on Diem. U.S. leaders were inclined to believe Diem's accusation that all who opposed him were Communists. They closed their eyes to the growing strength of the non-Communist, anti-Diem movement.

In April of 1960 nearly a score of prominent South Vietnamese men sent an open letter to Diem warning him to liberalize his regime. Neither Diem nor Washington responded. Another warning to Diem came a few months later in August. Again no comment from Diem or Washington. Three months later, in November, Diem's own elite paratroops rebelled and tried to overthrow him. The abortive coup did not appear to upset Washington or Diem.

It may be that Eisenhower recognized the warnings, but felt there was little he could do in the less than two months he had left as President. He may have reasoned that the problem could best be handled by the new Administration. Whether or not Eisenhower heard the warnings, the evidence suggests that the new President did. At least he saw a danger signal. As soon as he assumed office Kennedy sent General Lansdale to Vietnam

for a careful appraisal of what was happening and what was needed.

By the time Kennedy took office it was apparent that American efforts to prevent the fall of South Vietnam were not succeeding. The United States had failed, in part, because American decision-makers had misread and misunderstood the problem. But deterrence also failed because the insurgents decided that they could break it. Deterrence is, after all, only as strong as the opponent thinks it is. The next section discusses the conditions under which the insurgents were willing to risk changing the status quo and the objectives they sought.



III. WHY DETERRENCE FAILED: THE OPPONENTS' VIEW OF THE  
CONDITIONS, RISKS AND GOALS

Deterrence in South Vietnam failed because the insurgents in South Vietnam were not convinced that U.S. efforts to build a stable and popular government were successful. They apparently believed they could (given the proper opportunities and means) undermine Diem's authority and establish their own government. There is no question but that Diem's weak hold on the populace contributed significantly to the insurgents' decision to try to take over the government. It's clear that it wasn't only Communists who were interested in the fall of Diem. A large number of nationalists with no allegiance to Communism were also eager to replace Diem with an administration more responsive to Vietnamese social and political needs.

Between these two forces, Communism and nationalism, U.S. efforts to deter aggression through support of Diem were doomed. American officials had not seen the true nature of the problem. They backed a dogmatic, undemocratic leader with military assistance and economic aid in the hope that popular political faith would follow. Their interest might have been better served had they remembered the lessons of other revolutions. A strong political philosophy comes first; people do not mind a struggle if they believe in the tenets and ideals of their political faith. The South Vietnamese did not have political faith in their government. They did not admire it, respect it or identify with it. (Tanham, p. 157.) Diem did not even

attempt to foster or instill such attitudes. As a result dissidents in the South felt they could safely attack the Diem regime in spite of the American commitment.

The actual state of the American commitment was a matter of conjecture anyway. The insurgents could not be sure what the U.S. response would be to attacks on Diem from within South Vietnam. They assumed a clear-cut military attack would provoke a conventional U.S. response of defense and counterattack, but they could not be sure what the United States would do if it faced guerrilla tactics. It seemed unlikely that Washington would send troops to meet the problem. Even if troops did come, regular combat troops would not be an overwhelming threat. Combat troops would have trouble fighting guerrillas who rarely participated in conventional stand-and-fight operations. The insurgents apparently reasoned that the risk of U.S. military intervention was relatively slight. The objective of overthrowing the American-supported Diem government was well worth taking the risks.

It seems obvious that the insurgents sought to end American presence in South Vietnam. They saw the United States, not as a benevolent benefactor dedicated to protecting the South Vietnamese from the "slavery of Communism" (which is the way the United States saw itself, see Kennedy's letter to Diem, October 24, 1961, in Stebbins, Documents..., pp. 320-321), but as an imperialist power bent on preserving an anachronistic government in order to maintain a position of strength in Southeast Asia. Communist insurgents doubtless believed the United States wanted to take over the country. Non-Communists may not



have shared this view, but they nevertheless saw that the United States stood behind Diem and in the way of a truly representative government. While the insurgents may have differed about the ultimate intentions of the United States, they apparently agreed that the visible intentions of the United States were to support Diem. For the insurgents this was reason enough to undertake a guerrilla campaign to rid the country of the Americans who supported Diem as well as Diem himself.

At first the insurgents (Diem labeled them all Communists and called them the Vietcong) relied on terrorism to show that Diem could not provide the very first requirement of a government -- security and protection of the people. After a year or so some of the insurgents formed a political organization, the National Liberation Front, in order to have a voice to express their needs and goals. The NLF, equipped with a flag, a creed and a cause, provided the insurgents with the machinery necessary for political action.

One of the NLF's first political acts was to seek world-wide support for the insurgency. It is commonly believed that the NLF did not have to seek Communist support, that, indeed, it was the Communist government of North Vietnam that formed and organized the group. In reality NLF's connections with Hanoi were not so simple. It is true that a few months before the NLF was organized, the Third Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party urged the formation of a "national democratic coalition government of South Vietnam." (Zagoria, p. 106.) The evidence suggests, however, that while Hanoi gave verbal support

to a popular uprising in the South, it was somewhat reluctant to give more concrete help.

Whatever Hanoi's later relation with the NLF, it appears that in the beginning the North, preoccupied with the Laotian question and its own internal economic development, had many misgivings about supporting a southern revolt. (Zagoria, pp. 107-117.) Moreover, in 1960 and early 1961 North Vietnam adhered to the Soviet line of peaceful co-existence (Devillers, "North Vietnam..." p. 17.) As a consequence, Hanoi did not pressure the southern dissidents into action; it tried to restrain them. (Zagoria, pp. 104-106; Kroft in Lacouture, p. xii.)

Hanoi's caution lessened when it became evident that the revolution in the South could be supported without U.S. interference and without damage to the North's development. (Zagoria, pp. 105, 108.) There is even some evidence that the success of the southern insurrection forced Hanoi into helping. (Devillers, p. 19.)

Even when Hanoi did decide to provide guidance, cadres and some equipment, it did not supply major amounts of arms and materiel. (Tanham, p. 156.) How the NLF felt about Hanoi's reluctance is not known, but at least one Asian specialist concludes that the NLF and Hanoi were "suspicious" of each other (Zagoria, p. 133). Whatever the NLF's views of Hanoi, it's clear that it, and its military counterpart, the Vietcong, needed the support of the North who had the backing of both Moscow and Peking. Without this kind of major assistance, the Front could not carry out its political program to replace the government of Diem.



There's little information about the role Moscow and Peking played in the southern insurgency, but the available data indicates that they, like Hanoi, were not enthusiastic about the insurrection and only supported it when it became an embarrassment not to. In a minor way all three -- Hanoi, Moscow and Peking -- contributed to the failure of deterrence in South Vietnam. The major contribution, however, came from Diem, the Americans who supported him, and the insurgents who fought him.

To recapitulate, deterrence failed because the insurgents (the NLF and the Vietcong) believed the conditions of South Vietnam (Diem's weakness and the lack of popular support) permitted them to try terrorist tactics at a relatively low level of risk to obtain their objective of undermining Diem in order to set up their own government. That was how the insurgents saw the situation. How did the United States see it? How did Washington respond to the insurgency that threatened the status quo?

IV. U.S. RESPONSE TO THE FAILURE IN DETERRENCE:  
PERCEPTIONS, OPTIONS AND DECISIONS

When Kennedy took the oath of the President in 1961, he announced in ringing tones a new vision of a peaceful world. In a short, but carefully prepared, inaugural address he dedicated his new Administration to the task of finding a way for all nations to live together in harmony, without the constant threat of war, and without the constant fear of human annihilation. It was a formidable task -- and a tragically doomed one. The high hopes of the Kennedy Administration fell to more realistic levels within the first year. The Bay of Pigs, the Vienna confrontation with Khrushchev, the frequent political crises in Berlin and elsewhere, combined to convince Kennedy that perhaps the world was not ready for harmonious relations between nations. He didn't stop trying to bring about a rapprochement between the Communist and non-Communist countries, he simply approached the problem less idealistically.

One of Kennedy's learning experiences about the intractable world he inherited was Vietnam. In January when he sent General Lansdale to Vietnam he didn't expect the General's report to be so pessimistic. (Schlesinger, p. 540; Stempel, pp. 109-110.) The report outlined the grave state of affairs in South Vietnam: the increase in guerrilla activity, the poor political climate of Diem's government, and the inadequate preparations for counter-insurgency.



No immediate changes in the U.S. commitment to Vietnam resulted from Lansdale's report. The report did succeed, however, in bringing home to Washington officials the need for accurate, reliable information about Vietnam. In an effort to get the correct data, Kennedy regularly sent fact-finding missions to Saigon throughout 1961. Vice-President Johnson visited Diem in May; Eugene Staley attempted to assess the situation in the summer; and General Maxwell Taylor went in October for the same reason. The information Kennedy received from these sources indicated that Diem would not last without substantial help from the United States.

Before agreeing to underwrite Diem with more assistance, American policy-makers had to deal with the issue of national interest. Was it in the best interests of the United States to intervene even more actively in South Vietnamese affairs?

Arthur Schlesinger, one of Kennedy's assistants, argues that the previous Administration's decision in 1954 to support South Vietnam (leaving aside the question of whether that decision was in the best interests of the United States), in effect, made the protection of Vietnam "vital" to the United States. (Schlesinger, p. 537.) Both he and another Kennedy assistant, Theodore Sorensen, believe that Kennedy had no choice but to follow the path set by Eisenhower and Dulles. (Schlesinger, p. 538; Sorensen, p. 651.) Apparently no one considered rethinking the question of if the United States should be involved in Vietnam. It was assumed that U.S. interests were at stake and that an American "retreat" or withdrawal

in Southeast Asia would "upset" the balance between Communism and non-Communism and cause "undesirable consequences throughout the world." (Schlesinger, p. 548; Sorensen, p. 651.)

Moreover, because he believed the Bay of Pigs had put his leadership in a bad light vis-à-vis Communist leadership, Kennedy believed he could not back down in Vietnam without losing more face. (Stempel, p. 120.) He felt he had to show the Communists the strength of U.S. resolve in order to avoid future miscalculations. In addition, the Republicans were labeling his foreign policies, policies of "appeasement." Kennedy doubtless felt he had to take a strong anti-Communist position in Vietnam to convince his domestic critics that he was unalterably opposed to Communism.

There was some talk of Vietnam's importance to the strategic needs of the United States in its role of protector of the security of the free world. (Sorensen, p. 649.) Few people took this argument seriously. The consensus was that the Kennedy Administration had not shown the proper determination in its dealings with the Communists and that if Vietnam was going to be a test of respective postures, Kennedy would not flinch. He would stand firm before all Communist efforts to capture Vietnam.

Not everyone in Kennedy's Administration agreed that the way to show Washington's steadfastness was through increasing assistance to Vietnam. Some responsible officials recognized the danger of making a larger commitment to Vietnam. Under Secretary of State George Ball argued against more assistance because he feared that the increase



would lead to an escalation of force that would be difficult, if not impossible, to stop. He asked Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense McNamara if they realized that the increase might lead to a force of 300,000 American soldiers in Vietnam. They replied that they were aware of such a possibility, and that they hoped to avoid it, but they were willing to risk it. Ball said he, for one, was not willing to take such risks. (Reston, pp. 25-26.)

Others in Kennedy's Administration expressed their ideas. Chester Bowles was also opposed to more assistance to Vietnam. He favored working toward a neutral Southeast Asia to be guaranteed by SEATO and the Soviets. (Schlesinger, p. 545; Hilsman, pp. 423-424.) Senator Mike Mansfield and political commentators, Walter Lippmann and James Reston, also believed in this approach. (Warner, Last..., p. 166.) Reston argued that the United States should stay out of "border" areas where "geography favors them and runs against us." (Reston, New York Times, October 20, 1961.)

Walt Rostow, on the other hand, not only supported more assistance to South Vietnam, he also urged contingency plans for attacking North Vietnam in retaliation against infiltration from the North which he considered an act of aggression. (Campbell, p. 15; Schlesinger, pp. 546-547.) Rostow also believed the United States should introduce troops in order to achieve the desired ratio of 12 regulars to 1 insurgent. This suggestion prompted the wry John Kenneth Galbraith to remark that the United States had

better "be careful not to let any guns fall into the hands of the Sioux." (Warner, Last..., p. 166.)

Galbraith opposed Rostow's notion that the crisis in South Vietnam was military. He said the crisis was political and deplored the use of troops. After a trip to Saigon, he strongly advised Kennedy against sending combat forces. (Galbraith, p. 91.) He also told Schlesinger that most problems in South Vietnam stemmed from Diem. The United States was "married to a failure," said Galbraith and added, "nothing succeeds like successors." (Schlesinger, p. 548.)

Averill Harriman agreed with Galbraith's contention that there was a political, not a military, crisis in South Vietnam. He warned the Administration that the State Department always "underestimated the dynamics of revolution," (Schlesinger, p. 547), apparently because Rusk vigorously supported prosecution of the war with military means. (Hilsman, p. 421.)

The President, who had to decide just what the threat was and the best way to meet it, studied the various views. His decision, however, was colored by factors other than the opinions of his staff and members of the various departments. He had to take into consideration the U.S. allies, domestic opinion and his own personal judgment about the role of the United States in Diem's South Vietnam.

The allies apparently offered no problem. When Rusk informed Great Britain and France of the possible increase in U.S. assistance to South Vietnam neither objected. Government officials in France understandably (in view of



their own experience in Southeast Asia) felt the United States was making a mistake in become more deeply involved in Vietnam, but they did not oppose the plans. (Kenworthy, New York Times.)

Public opinion presented no problems either. The general public expressed little or no interest in Southeast Asia, a state of affairs that practically gave Washington a blank check in Vietnam. (Stempel, p. 292.) Kennedy deliberately cultivated this lack of interest. When Taylor recommended a major television address on the Vietnamese problem, Kennedy refused on the grounds that he didn't want to give Vietnam a status comparable to Berlin. (Sorensen, p. 656.) The White House, aware of the differences in opinion over the risks involved in increasing U.S. assistance, chose not to discuss publicly the new measures and their implications in detail. (Kenworthy, New York Times; Reston, p. 26; Stempel, p. 123.)

This lack of candor apparently sprang from both the hope that an increase would be enough to defeat the insurgents and the belief that the issue was not important enough to warrant public exposure, at least not on top of the Berlin crisis currently plaguing the country. It may also be that Kennedy, sensitive to Republican charges that he was "soft" on Communism, preferred to play his cards on Vietnam close to the vest. (See Kennedy's press conference, New York Times, October 12, 1961.)

Kennedy's judgment of the U.S. role in Diem's Vietnam also tempered his decision about what to do in Vietnam. The steady deterioration of Diem's government not only provoked the crisis that faced the United States, it was a

source of embarrassment to American decision-makers in that it symbolized the lack of will in South Vietnam. Diem insisted that it was not just an internal guerrilla war he faced, but a "real war waged by an enemy who attacks us with regular units fully and completely equipped and who seeks a strategic position in Southeast Asia in conformity with the orders of the Communist International." (Quoted in China and U.S. Far East Policy, p. 108.)

While Kennedy concurred in part with Diem's description of the situation, he recognized, as Diem did not, that in the end the South Vietnamese, even with U.S. military and economic aid, and even with a U.S. guarantee against an invasion from the North, would have to fight for their own country. He believed that native troops, not foreign troops, were the best bulwarks against a Communist takeover. (Hilsman, p. 423.) He put it on the line when he said: "...they have to -- and we cannot do it for them -- they have to organize the political and social life of the country in such a way that they maintain the support of their people. There is a limit beyond which our efforts cannot go." (Quoted in New York Times, May 6, 1961.)

In spite of his awareness that the real problem in South Vietnam was the lack of political strength, Kennedy felt he had to do something to bolster the resources of the failing country. What were his options?

One option, to work toward a neutral South Vietnam (see p. 19), was dismissed rather quickly. Sorensen writes that Kennedy felt he could not achieve a Laotian-type of neutralization in Vietnam because he believed the Communists had such a strong hold on the country that they would overwhelm a neutral government. (Sorensen, p. 64.) In Laos



the Communist strength had been balanced by a relatively strong force on the right and moderately strong number seeking a neutral stance.

With neutralization ruled out and withdrawal never considered, the only remaining options were to continue assistance at the same levels or to increase assistance. As all reports indicated that a continuation of the same assistance would lead to the fall of South Vietnam, the discussion of alternatives centered around the question of how much more help should be sent.

There wasn't any question about what kind of help would be sent. From the beginning U.S. intervention in Vietnam had been primarily military. All fact-finding missions recommended more military assistance. Each report urged political and social reforms, but few suggested specific programs to achieve the reforms. There was no dearth, however, of suggestions for military increases.

As early as the spring of 1961, the NSC recommended sending more aid to Vietnam. (Stempel, p. 119.) At the same time the JCS recommended intervening with U.S. troops in both South Vietnam and Laos (before its neutrality had been established). (Sorensen, p. 651.) While Kennedy apparently considered the introduction of U.S. troops (he said in a press conference on May 5, 1961, that troop commitment was "under study," New York Times), Sorensen reports that he was skeptical of sending troops and "wanted more questions answered and more alternatives presented." (Ibid.)

Kennedy may have balked at making a premature decision about American troops, but he didn't hesitate to okay a

task force on counterinsurgency for Vietnam. (Stempel, p. 115.) Vice-President Johnson, in Saigon in May, announced with Diem that the United States would increase its aid to help fight the guerrilla forces. (Fall, Reader, p. 384.) That summer the United States began the counterinsurgency program of "strategic hamlets" worked out by Staley and Diem's brother. (New York Times, May 29, 1961; Lacouture, pp. 64-65.) The hamlet program was a classic example of too little, too late. The strategy of protecting the people in the rural areas by providing heavily guarded villages to which they could return at night after working in the fields all day never achieved the success Saigon and Washington hoped it would.

By fall it was clear that something more was needed. Kennedy dispatched Taylor to Saigon "to discuss...on the spot ways in which we can perhaps better assist the Government of Vietnam in meeting the threat..." (New York Times, October 12, 1961.) Taylor arrived in Saigon in the middle of October with Rostow as the key political adviser and representatives of AID, the CIA, the USIA and the Bureau of the Budget. (Stempel, p. 119.)

Back in Washington shortly after the first of November, Taylor reported that Diem's forces were hard pressed by internal problems, lack of supplies and equipment, and the steady stream of men and materiel from the North. (Time, November 3, 1961.) Taylor suggested improving South Vietnamese counterinsurgency capability by sending them highly specialized U.S. advisers and equipment. The emphasis was on re-training Diem's forces with the help of U.S. experts in guerrilla fighting, logistics, communications and intelligence-gathering. A limited supply of



aircraft and special equipment would also be sent.

(Kenworthy, New York Times.)

The NSC, meeting in the middle of November, approved and recommended Taylor's suggestions. (Ibid.) The Taylor report also strongly suggested that Diem institute democratic reforms. (Stempel, pp. 121-122.) There is no indication that the NSC acted on these suggestions. Kennedy wanted the reforms (Sorensen, p. 653), but he didn't insist on them. He did approve the military recommendations. By December the decision to increase U.S. assistance to South Vietnam with more specialists and supplies was being implemented.

While Kennedy acted on the suggestions to continue "more of the same," he did not act on the more significant, but not always clearly revealed, request to send U.S. troops. There is no direct evidence that the Taylor report recommended introducing troops. (S. L. A. Marshall did say that only one-fourth of Taylor's recommendations were finally adopted. (Fall, Two..., p. 332.) When word periodically leaked to the press that Washington was going to send combat troops to South Vietnam, Taylor and other spokesmen for the military establishment always denied the story. They did qualify their denials by saying that the troops might be necessary at some future date. (Fall, Reader, p. 385.)

In spite of these denials two of Kennedy's most trusted assistants have revealed that he was under heavy pressure to commit troops to Vietnam. Sorensen writes that all of Kennedy's "principal advisers on Vietnam favored" the use of troops -- apparently not so much for combat purposes as

for purposes of bolstering the morale of the South Vietnamese. U.S. troops would be a vivid display of the strength of the U.S. commitment. (Sorensen, p. 653.)

Schlesinger also recalls that Kennedy had to deal with proposals to send troops. "They want a force of American troops," Kennedy told Schlesinger in November. "They say it's necessary," he continued, "in order to restore confidence and maintain morale." But Kennedy refused to make the commitment: "It will be just like Berlin," he said, "the troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have to have another." (Schlesinger, p. 547.)

In characteristic Kennedy style the President did not say no to the use of American troops, he just didn't say yes. (Hilsman, p. 424.) Not only did the maneuver avoid a "never position" he felt he couldn't afford (Kenworthy, New York Times), it also, in the words of Sorensen, made it "difficult for the pro-intervention advocates to charge him privately with weakness." (Sorensen, p. 654.)

In the final analysis Kennedy's decision to increase aid was marginal. He didn't change the fundamental nature of U.S. assistance. He didn't arouse a silent public or excite Congressional inquisitiveness. (Stempel, p. 287.) He simply authorized more of what the United States was already doing.

In view of subsequent decisions that have altered the basic nature of U.S. assistance, Kennedy's decision to



expand American assistance in 1961 seems insignificant. It is not. Because the decision involved only a marginal increase does not relieve it of its responsibilities. 1961 was an opportunity to re-examine a 1954 commitment. The opportunity was lost. Why did Kennedy increase U.S. aid rather than question its necessity? The answer suggests that Kennedy acted in good faith, but on the wrong perceptions.

Kennedy chose a course of action (increased aid) in the hopes that it would achieve the objectives he sought (retaining a viable pro-Western government in South Vietnam and discouraging the insurgents' rebellion against Diem.) The course of action and the objectives were based on his perception of the crisis as a test of U.S. resolve. Official Washington did not emphasize the fact that the South Vietnamese crisis was largely the result of internal dissension and unrest. Instead, U.S. policy-makers focused on the help the insurgents received from the North. They supposed that this help reflected Communist determination to take over South Vietnam and eventually all of Southeast Asia. As a consequence of this supposition they perceived the threat in world-wide terms. They thought they had to make a stand in Vietnam to show all Communist countries, particularly the Soviet Union, that the United States would not tolerate any inroads into pro-Western territories.

To show that the Communists were attempting to alter the status quo by force, the State Department published a White Paper in December 1961 documenting a large-scale infiltration into the South by the North Vietnamese. The document

openly acknowledged its dependence on intelligence and information gathered by the South Vietnamese. (See Department of State, "A Threat to the Peace....") Apparently no one questioned these sources. Officials assumed the North was fomenting the revolution in the South and welcomed any evidence supporting their assumption. It should be noted that infiltration did increase in the fall of 1961 (Warner, Last...., p. 166). But the growing success of the Vietcong depended most often on Diem's weakness (Newsweek, November 6, 1961), not on help from the North.

Although U.S. policy-makers could not document USSR support of the Vietcong, they still felt the Soviets were in some way behind Hanoi's efforts to help the insurgents in South Vietnam. Kennedy grimly told Gromyko in October that the crises in Berlin and Southeast Asia were putting a severe strain on U.S. and USSR abilities to negotiate their differences. (New York Times, October 8, 1961.) This suggests that Washington thought Moscow had some control over the situation in Vietnam. U.S. policy-makers hoped to influence that control by showing American determination to back Diem. They also hoped a strong stand would persuade Communist leaders in Moscow to temper their antagonistic behavior in other matters of concern between the two countries.

Washington leaders wanted to show U.S. resolve; they reasoned that in order to show U.S. resolution, they had to prevent Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. In order to prevent Communist expansion, they further reasoned, they had to support Diem in South Vietnam. The United States



had indeed settled on a policy of, in the phrase of the New York Times, "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem."  
(Schlesinger, p. 548.)

## V. RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS

The U.S. decision to increase aid to South Vietnam in 1961 did achieve the objective of keeping a pro-Western government in power in South Vietnam. It did not achieve the objective of deterring the insurgents. Indeed, the insurgents profited from the increase because Communist countries sympathetic to their cause rallied to their defense. Both Peking and Moscow began to agitate for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. advisers. (Fall, Reader, p. 386.)

U.S. decision-makers had hoped to influence Communist policy and posture. They did, but not in the way they hoped. Instead of forcing the Soviets into a more conciliatory line with the West, the decision hardened the Soviet approach.

The decision also hardened the U.S. commitment to Vietnam. The hardening is reflected in the Defense Department's statement in February 1962 that the war in Vietnam was "a war we can't afford to lose.... we're drawing a line against Communist aggression in South Vietnam." (Quoted in China and U.S....., pp. 110-111.) In May Time reported that the United States was "now determined to back Diem all the way and to win in South Vietnam even if it takes a decade -- as well it may." Robert Kennedy was reported to have said: "We are going to win in Vietnam. We will remain until we do." (Time, May 11, 1962.)

These kinds of statements, without the qualifications of the previous year, reveal that while Kennedy may not



have intended his decision to limit his control of the situation, it had that effect in the end. No fundamental changes in U.S. policy were anticipated by the decision-makers in the fall of 1961. But the decision itself brought on a change in outlook. After the decision was implemented, U.S. officials saw that although a loss of South Vietnam before the increased aid would have been an unhappy event, a similar loss after the increase would be disastrous. In other words, the increase in assistance created an atmosphere that demanded an increase in commitment. The United States had begun its "slide" into the war in Vietnam.

It was an expensive slide. The 1961 decision cost the United States a great deal. Within a year of the decision the 685 advisers in South Vietnam had grown to over 10,000. Since the Geneva Accords quite clearly limited foreign advisers in both North and South Vietnam to 685, the decision to increase U.S. advisers triggered some anti-imperialist sentiment from countries outside Communist influence. In addition to provoking this kind of hostility, the increase also failed to defrost the "frigid" relations that existed between U.S. advisers and Diem's government (Time, May 11, 1962), a condition that effectively eliminated the chance of Diem making any reforms. All in all it had been a costly decision. It had succeeded in preventing an almost certain insurgent victory over Diem, but it also angered the leaders of Communism, disturbed other non-Communist countries, created more animosity in Saigon and hardened the U.S. commitment.

Was the cost necessary? Could the failure in deterrence have been prevented? Could the response have been more effective?

With respect to preventing the failure, one must return to the years between 1954, the year of the original involvement and 1959, the year the insurgents began their concentrated attacks. The United States had nearly five years to help Diem build a responsible government that the people would want to support. It did not use the time because few people realized the depth of the political trouble Diem faced. Washington assumed, on the basis of the information it received, that everything was all right. U.S. officials can be forgiven for assuming all was well when there was no evidence to the contrary. They cannot be so easily forgiven for deliberately ignoring and denying the evidence that suggested grave problems existed in Vietnam when it began to appear in 1959.

It is difficult to understand Washington's intolerance of dissenting views about the conditions in South Vietnam in 1959 and 1960. It is the responsibility of U.S. leaders to listen to, even to seek, views opposing official policy -- if only to test the accuracy of official information. Instead of listening to dissenters within government circles, top U.S. policy-makers questioned their ability to judge the "real" situation. As a result, Washington closed its eyes to the imminent failure of deterrence in South Vietnam. Had they listened to the voices that urged a re-orientation of U.S. policy from military preoccupations to the need for political reform the failure might never have occurred.

As for improving the effectiveness of the U.S. response in meeting the failure, one must return to the need for a



government to re-examine its basic policies, especially when it has the opportunity. A re-examination of U.S. policy in South Vietnam in 1961 might have shown that the most effective U.S. response to the failure would have been to restrict intervention, not increase it. Nearly everyone in Kennedy's Administration recognized that Diem did not have the support of his people, but few suggested forcing Diem into implementing changes or withdrawing U.S. support. Rather than seeing the failure of deterrence as a failure of Diem's government, most of Kennedy's advisers saw the failure as a threat to U.S. interests. They thought it was "vital" to show the Communists that the United States would never back down on a commitment. Advisers who disagreed with this assessment or who warned of the risks in increasing the U.S. commitment were not in the majority. They were overruled.

From the perspective of time it is important that the prediction of the risks involved in the increased aid were never publicly aired. A public discussion of the risks might have required Kennedy to determine very carefully just how much he was willing to pay to show U.S. resolve in South Vietnam. The decision in 1961 may have been the right one, but it was made without proper respect for the possible risks. Kennedy was not required to put a ceiling on the costs the United States was willing to bear in South Vietnam. Time has shown these costs to be exorbitant. The decision saved Diem temporarily, but it did not stabilize the situation.

Sorensen has said that a President, in his decision-making role, "must choose among men, among measures, among

methods." (Sorensen, Decisionmaking in the White House, p. xii.) It would seem, in view of the 1961 decision to increase assistance to South Vietnam, that a president, when faced with a decision about intervention, should also consider whether, in Theodore H. White's words, the United States "has the proper personnel, the proper instruments, the proper clarity of objectives to intervene successfully." (Quoted in Schlesinger, p. 544.) It seems a relevant consideration in 1968.



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